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Diploma Programme subject in which this extended essay is registered: Philosophy
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Title of the extended essay: The Moral Landscape: An Analysis of
Morality and the Scientific Method

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The extended essay I am submitting is my own work (apart from guidance allowed by the International Baccalaureate).

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This candidate is a thinker of the first order. He will attend Harvard in the fall. His writing skills do not match his thoughtful nature. This he sees as very much a work in progress. Without the deadline I am sure he would have rewritten yet again.

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I spent 5 hours with the candidate discussing the progress of the extended essay.

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Assessment form (for examiner use only)

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Achievement level

Criteria	Examiner 1	maximum	Examiner 2	maximum	Examiner 3
A research question	1	2		2	
B introduction	1	2		2	
C investigation	3	4		4	
D knowledge and understanding	3	4		4	
E reasoned argument	3	4		4	
F analysis and evaluation	3	4		4	
G use of subject language	4	4		4	
H conclusion	2	2		2	
I formal presentation	4	4		4	
J abstract	2	2		2	
K holistic judgment	3	4		4	

Total out of 36

29

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Name of examiner 1: _____ Examiner number: _____
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Name of examiner 3: _____ Examiner number: _____
(CAPITAL letters)

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The Moral Landscape: An Analysis of Morality and the Scientific Method

Word Count: 3796 ✓

Session Number: May 2015

Subject: Philosophy

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to rectify a growing divide among people of my generation regarding science and philosophy by examining The Moral Landscape by Sam Harris. This book is significant not only for its own ideas, but also because it represents a burgeoning movement to discount philosophy in favor of science when pursuing moral truths. However, this essay set out to demonstrate the necessity of performing and understanding philosophy when dealing with the world's most intellectually taxing questions. I began by thinking about my experiences with people who preferred science over philosophy, and researching their point of views. I then read The Moral Landscape in order to approach a typical staple of this growing movement. This gave rise to my research question: to what extent does the proposition of a science of morality reveal about the nature of the scientific method and the process of philosophical inquiry? Using several lectures, books, and miscellaneous online sources, I began to systematically critique and refute Harris's moral landscape methodology. The aspects explored include: Harris's moral landscape, the naturalistic fallacy, the problem of induction, the is-ought problem, the scientific method, and Pragmatic Ethics. By analyzing Harris's argument, I not only demonstrated the difficulty of drawing moral truths from science, but also salvaged a meaningful way to conduct a study of morality, as long as one remained cautious regarding the aforementioned problems. By demonstrating the continued value of philosophy to scientists, I revealed a way for scientists and philosophers to work together in pursuit of common goals, rather than separate in mutual suspicion.

Word Count: 260

Introduction

“Most people imagine,” Sam Harris writes, “that science cannot pose, much less answer, questions of [morals]. How could we ever say, as a matter of scientific fact, that one way of life is better, or more moral, than another? Whose definition of “better” or “moral” would we use?” (2011)

These ancient problems are the focus of his book The Moral Landscape, where Harris attempts to derive a normative ethical framework through the development of a science of morality: the scientific study of the moral values held by humans. Aiming to reject both religion-based ethical systems and moral relativism, Harris proposes an ethical system that promotes “well-being”—defined by Harris as “the flourishing of conscious creatures”—by identifying appropriate sets of moral values in order to answer ethical dilemmas. Harris believes that moral values can be reduced to a matter of specific brain states, and that “well-being” is the quantitative manifestation of several possible ideal brain states, which would imply that cognitive neuroscience would be the key to eventually deriving moral facts from the natural world. This position, rooted in a secular humanist perspective, has developed in popularity over the past few decades thanks to the growing reverence of science in American culture; however, Harris’s investigation stumbles into several underlying philosophical assumptions that threaten to tear his entire argument apart. This gives rise to my research question: to what extent does the proposition of a science of morality reveal about the nature of the scientific method and the process of philosophical inquiry?

Within this critique of The Moral Landscape, I will cover the primary argument of The Moral Landscape, seguing into its implications regarding ethics, metaethics, and philosophy of science. In addition, I hope to garner insight into the nature of philosophical inquiry in order to

illuminate the importance of interaction between the study of science and philosophy; ultimately, both fields pursue same teleological endgame: the quest for knowledge. ✓

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I. Summary of The Moral Landscape

i. The Good Life vs. The Bad Life

Sam Harris begins his argument with a simple thought experiment: a comparison of two hypothetical extremes, *The Good Life*, and *The Bad Life*, in order to demonstrate, intuitively, how we can conceive of an ethical system where we understand that: (1) some lifestyles are preferable to others, and (2) the differences in these lifestyles can be examined through some lawful, non-arbitrary lens. While Harris's examples of *Good* and *Bad* appeal heavily to Western intuitions of morality, they nevertheless invoke a powerful emotional response that invites us to investigate further. *The Bad Life* represents a life unfulfilled: the story of an African widow, whose life, governed by constant emergency, is nasty, brutish, and short. In contrast, *The Good Life* portrays an example of a successful person, who is satisfied physically, intellectually, emotionally, and even *ethically* through the ability to utilize success to benefit the lives of other, less fortunate people. Harris evaluates the differences between these two hypothetical lives by appealing to subjective—yet tangible—metrics like happiness, and more ethereal, abstract concepts like personal satisfaction. Above all, Harris rejects that the difference between these two lives is trivial: that the difference between these two lives points towards some potential ethical system: the promotion of “well-being”, which will be discussed later.

ii. Values, Facts, and the Origins of Morality

Of course, this assumption—that some lifestyles are preferable to others—warrants further justification; after all, there might exist no discernible patterns that make rational humans inclined to prefer some lifestyles over others. To solve this dilemma, Harris inquires about the origins of different lifestyles and societal conditions, which he boils down into the manifestation of values, i.e., a belief system. The various forms of human and inter-human interactions are the

result of actions, which themselves are the effects of values. This allows for the reduction of the causes of lifestyles and societal conditions to the prevalence of certain values over other values. Moreover, Harris argues that the idea of preferential values implies that people must believe that there are *right* values and *wrong* values. Harris, through his support of scientific realism¹, states that humans can have *right* beliefs and *wrong* beliefs about reality by how those beliefs correspond to scientific facts. Thus, if values can be reduced to facts, then a science of morality would be able to ethically govern human behavior. ✓

D In order to unite *values* and *facts*, Harris proposes examining *values* through the lens of neuroscience. This is accomplished by returning back to the mind when discussing ethics, since certain *values* lead to certain actions that lead to certain outcomes, and certain outcomes, caused by either the original agent or outside events, may influence those initial certain *values*, affecting the mind in a recursive fashion. To serve as an ethical criterion, Harris defines the term *well-being*, which he initially defines loosely as “the flourishing of conscious creatures”. (2010) This allows for the measurement of *values*, which are derived from observable brain states, with the ultimate goal of promoting *well-being*. Hence, Harris establishes the foundations for the science of morality, as brain states can be empirically determined to correspond with an individual’s level of *well-being*, proving that some values promote *well-being* more than other *values*. While Harris admits that he could not convince everybody to follow the same *values*, a science of morality would still be able to provide humans with normative direction—what one must value to avoid *The Bad Life* and achieve *The Good Life*—if one desired to be ethical. (2010) X

¹ Scientific realism is a positive epistemic attitude towards the content of our best theories and models, recommending belief in both observable and unobservable aspects of the world described by the sciences. (Chakravartty, 2011)

iii. Well-Being, Ethics, and the Moral Landscape

Perhaps the greatest motivation for Sam Harris's science of morality is his rejection of moral relativism, which many opponents claim is the result of dismissal of both contemporary ethics and religious ethics. In order to resolve ethical dilemmas, Harris believes that an ethical system based on facts must be derived. When Harris compares one society to another, he wants to have the descriptive power to compare both societies to see which one promotes greater flourishing of conscious creatures. ✓

Returning to the initial thought experiment, Harris recognizes that there are problems to defining *well-being* from the differences in lifestyles given. Some of the heuristics used by Harris, like happiness, are satisfied by all kinds of non-intuitively-desirable actions; for example, a psychopath may obtain happiness from killing other people, and a doctor may suffer hardship in order to treat patients in developing nations. Furthermore, this entails that it is not clear whether the unanimous preference for particular value dictates that value's relevance to the promotion of *well-being*. Lastly, the initial thought experiment reveals its bias towards Western tastes, especially with *The Good Life* mirroring the individualistic "American Dream". To even expound upon his idea of *well-being*, Harris has to rely on asserting values that his audience may already take for granted, such as happiness, fairness, and justice, in order to convey his idea of what *well-being* actually might be. ✓

Comparing Harris's proposed ethical system to the three mainstream contemporary positions proves to be a difficult challenge, since Harris approaches the problem of ethics by trying to resolve the intuitive conflicts presented by utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics. A superficial reader may be tempted to believe that Harris is promoting some form of act-utilitarianism through his emphasis on tangible values, like happiness, and his use of language

such as “maximizing” well-being; however, Harris rejects a strictly hedonistic approach by asserting that *well-being* may also constitute personal achievement and a meaningful life. (2010)

In fact, Harris’s system mostly closely resembles some of Aristotle’s central concepts in *Nichomachean Ethics*, with *well-being* becoming analogous to *eudaimonia*, and the ideal brain state replacing The Golden Mean as an ethical guide. Given the aforementioned problems, Harris finds himself balancing outcomes, duties, and virtues in order to approach a coherent definition of *well-being*.

Harris understands that to define “well-being” as anything more precise as “the flourishing of conscious creatures” would be equivalent to solving the entire field of ethics, which Harris knows that he does not have neither the evidence nor the argument to realize. Instead, he aims to provide a normative, yet scientifically-based, ethical framework for future development and use. To define “well-being”, Harris remains intentionally vague in order for it to remain malleable and adaptable like a scientific theory.

In addition, the theory of *well-being* allows for cultural diversity because of the second of its two possible outcomes: (1) one ideal brain state corresponding with the promotion of *well-being*, or (2) several different, but viable, ideal brain states corresponding to different lifestyles that are ultimately comparable in their promotion of *well-being*. The possibility of several different, but measurable and comparable, moral outcomes describes the title, The Moral Landscape, which invokes visual imagery to describe the subject of scientific morality as "the space of real and potential outcomes whose peaks correspond to the heights of potential well-being and whose valleys represent the deepest possible suffering.", since ultimately, the only factor that matters is the attainment of *well-being*.

II. On Metaethics

i. The Naturalistic Fallacy

Any claim revolving around the inherent goodness of a natural property must address G.E Moore's naturalistic fallacy: the difficulty of deriving an intrinsic good from natural properties. (1903) Related to the naturalistic fallacy is Moore's open-question argument, which attempts to explain the difference between amoral properties and "goodness". Ignoring nuances in language, which may inadvertently cause ambiguity, Moore's ontological argument involves comparing "good" with another property, determining first whether the two properties are equivalent in identity and equivalent in meaning. If the question of identity is uncertain, then the question is said to be open. Therefore, the properties cannot be equivalent in meaning, (Ashford, 2005) highlighting the difficulty of reducing moral facts to natural properties. ✓

ii. Harris's Criterion and Framework

Within The Moral Landscape, Harris specifically addresses the naturalistic fallacy by G. E. Moore. Harris's response to Moore is to avoid worrying about whether one can derive an intrinsic good from properties such as pleasure (2010). Rather, Harris institutes a value criterion of "well-being", defined as a value similar to, yet separate from, other forms of experience such as pleasure, happiness, and evolutionary fitness. (2010). According to Harris, this definition of well-being can change over time as new scientific evidence challenges old conceptions. This provides a solution to Moore's problem by circumventing the naturalistic fallacy; by eliminating the doubt within value of natural properties, an action's outcome only needs to be empirically shown to maximize the well-being of humans in order for the action to be good; however, this moral framework only provides a superficial solution the problems raised by G.E. Moore.

Unfortunately for Harris's framework, this means his value criterion must face the full brunt of the naturalistic fallacy. By removing the moralistic burden of proof from natural properties, whether it would be action or outcome, the burden of proof then falls onto the final goal of well-being. Whether any definition of well-being can stand the test of the naturalistic fallacy is in question, as well-being represents an end goal that itself requires value judgments. Such value judgments would be impossible to verify from observations of the outside world, for every observation would require an additional value judgment. Harris cannot escape this critical flaw through a recursion of shifting burdens or redefining well-being because the naturalistic fallacy is a response to a fundamental quality of human experience – induction. /

iii. The Problem of Induction

Harris, by invoking the inductive reasoning of science, must tackle with the Problem of Induction. The Problem of Induction concerns the faults of inductive reasoning and the inability to conclusively support or justify them through deductive means. Hume began his analysis of inductive reasoning by creating a distinction between "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact", i.e., deductive and inductive reasoning. Hume then identifies the problems inherent in the ability of observation to identify causation with certainty. Hume's conclusions not only suggest that correlation does not automatically mean causation, but also imply that only further induction can justify induction in a form of shaky, uncertain circular reasoning. This leaves deductive reasoning, which itself is eventually subject to circular reasoning due to the inherent nature of deductive logic. Every single argument must be built upon a set of axioms. These axioms, or assertions, can also be challenged themselves as arguments, leaving no axiom safe from recursive inquiry. While Hume acknowledges that deductive reasoning could provide truth within the constraints of a certain axiomatic system, Hume demonstrates that no argument can

eventually resist a reduction to circular principles. Even if a set of axioms represented the outside world, we would have no concrete evidence that our axioms were true with certainty, as those axioms must be based off of inductive reasoning.

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iv. The Is-Ought Problem

From these conclusions, we can follow how the is-ought problem is derived. By observing the outside world, we cannot identify an intrinsic value to our experiences. Any observation of the outside world will retain some degree of dubious quality. Even if we could record an event with complete accuracy, we must then create a value judgment of said observation. Further inductive reasoning would only demand further inconclusive observations to justify itself, while deductive reasoning would retain the same element of axiomatic instability.

Whenever an "ought" statement is derived from a set of only "is" statements, a certain disconnect occurs between "is" and "ought". Hume defined how this type of non sequitur created flaws in reasoning by highlighting how an "ought" conclusion is unrelated to an "is" premise. (1978) Hidden within each "ought" conclusion is a value judgment. When we include this normally hidden premise, we temporarily bridge the is-ought gap. While the initial argument, "is", "value judgment", and "ought", may be sound, the value judgment itself may not be valid. This value judgment will need to justify itself in a separate is-ought argument, running into the potential for infinite recursion when attempting to validate an original ought.

While the naturalistic fallacy is an application of the is-ought problem, the is-ought problem extends far beyond criticisms of deriving an intrinsic good from natural properties. On its own, Hume's argument threatens to shatter the very foundations of an objective morality, even

if it is not scientifically derived according to Harris's method. For ethics to be objective, it must firmly be ground within "ought".

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v. Implications For The Moral Landscape

These problems do not present themselves on an everyday basis; common sense implies that the sun will continue to rise with an astronomically high chance. While pragmatically, we can safely ignore these problems due to their irrelevance in everyday life, intellectually they present a difficult obstacle to any objective system of morality. Any uncertainty creates a flaw in the logic necessary to justify and support any moral premise and conclusion. While this does not preclude the existence of an objective morality, it certainly provides an obstacle to knowing an objective morality. This is a problem that Harris seeks to combat with his rejection of religious-based systems, but fails to overcome with his own propositions.

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It becomes clear that Harris has not made a strong enough case for an objective moral system. Harris himself acknowledges that without accepting his premises dealing with the holistic differences between "The Good Life" and "The Bad Life", the reader will not be able to agree with his moral landscape. (2010) His proposition is actually a form of Pragmatism that, while fitting his value criterion, does not provide enough insight to identify moral truths. By only being able to assert his criterion of "well-being", he has not found a solution to discovering an objective morality or a superior answer to existing claims of moral truth. Rather, Harris only adds an element of scientific positivism to moral decisions and values. Harris only weakly supports that his moral landscape could attain objective truths with certainty. His approach is only a pragmatic solution for the scientific study of morality, a study that could not objectively guide how one should live and act, only how to successfully pursue a certain lifestyle. The

strength of Harris's thesis is not within his objective morality, but within his proposed study of achieving that objective morality, whatever that may be.

III. The Pragmatic Approach

Harris's moral landscape approach to morality has roots in Pragmatic Ethics, an attempt to explain ethics as an ever-progressing social phenomenon. Much like how Harris rejects "private morality", Pragmatic Ethics strives to define ethics as it relates to society. (LaFollette, 2000) The ultimate goal of Pragmatic Ethics is to provide meaningful yet practical solutions to ethical problems. Clearly, figuring out the proper values to follow is an inordinately difficult task, but despite the theoretical problems, we still require answers for everyday issues.

"A pragmatic ethic employs criteria without being criterial. It is objective without being absolutist. It acknowledges that ethical judgments are relative, without being relativistic. And it tolerates – indeed, welcomes – some moral differences, without being irresolute." (LaFollette, 2000)

Essentially, Pragmatic Ethics is a fluid framework for ethical theories to be developed, executed, and reevaluated as needed. By simply holding an important, preferred principle as a given, an exploration of how to achieve this principle can be conducted. Pragmatic Ethics sidesteps from figuring out a moral truth to achieving a moral truth in the real world. This framework also allows for several different approaches to be used. While this may appear to be relativistic in nature, its endgame goal is to approach an objective morality through heuristics.

i. Truth In Science

Since science by definition contains an inductive component, any definition of truth in science must resolve the Problem of Induction, as a lack of certainty threatens our ability to call scientific discoveries "knowledge". However, induction still appears to work well enough to be useful, despite its occasional lapses in reasoning. Moritz Schlick aptly states "The criterion of

causality is successful prediction. That is all we can say." (as cited in Abel, 1966, p. 48). As Abel suggests, every scientific theory involves a compromise with varying kinds of data, since no theory is in complete accord with all the data. (1966)

Otherwise, we reach truth in science pragmatically, a compromise between the Problem of Induction and our need for practical applications. In science, we are only worried about sufficiently verifying a hypothesis, otherwise we would be unable to progress forward ~~since~~ no hypothesis can be completely verified. (Rudner, 1953)

ii. The Moral Landscape, Pragmatic Ethics, and The Scientific Method

Sam Harris's The Moral Landscape, with its scientific lens, eventually morphs into Pragmatic Ethics. Harris never solves the problem of determining the value of "well-being". Harris, by shifting the burden of "ought" onto "well-being", allows science to play a role in determining how to reach "well-being", for every action is now justified by the want of well-being. Bayesian epistemology is clearly useless for this question, given the complexity of the mind, as there are more possible brain states than there are atoms in the universe; in addition, Harris has yet to sufficiently answer why well-being is the ultimate moral goal. (Ramachadran, 2004) This is not a serious problem if an ethical system is evaluated pragmatically. Not only does Harris vaguely define well-being, he allows for it to be malleable as new data replaces old explanations. The results of such experimentation could offer potential insight for philosophers, especially through exploration of the brain. While science will not be able to concretely solve philosophical problems, it may offer new pathways for investigation, bring inspiration to old ideas, and may even cause new ideas to spring forth that have never been considered before. Through this continuous analysis, we might eventually come to an intuitive understanding of

how to achieve an objective moral system. Science reaches truth pragmatically. Therefore, through its use of science, Harris's The Moral Landscape may reach pragmatic truth as well.

While there must be caution in pursuing Pragmatic Ethics, for Pragmatic Ethics simply asserts the moral value in order to act upon it, its use may provide valuable insights into the nature of morality. While we may never know the absolute, we might be able to approximately attain it.

Conclusion

“There is no sharp dividing line between science and philosophy, but philosophical problems tend to have three special features. First, they tend to concern large frameworks rather than specific questions within the framework. Second, they are questions for which there is no generally accepted method of solution. And third, they tend to involve conceptual issues. For these reasons a philosophical problem such as the nature of life can become a scientific problem if it is put into a shape where it admits of scientific resolution.” (Searle, 1999)

Many fields of philosophy are being replaced or supplemented by science, but all of science relies on axioms and philosophical assumptions about the nature of existence itself which are ultimately unobservable, but which are open to philosophical examination. For example, the nature of truth is not open to scientific explanation, though the concept is fundamental to any scientific endeavour. The same can be said about the most fundamental aspects of existence itself. Science can only look at things which are, philosophy can ask and come to conclusions about what this "isness" really is.

Harris's The Moral Landscape represents the common sentiment held by many other scientific minded people within today's generation to eschew old philosophical, religious, and cultural traditions in order to contribute to the progress of humanity. However, without realizing that one must perform philosophy in order to answer some of life's toughest questions, these scientists will run into serious problems once the scope of their questions escape the realm of the scientific method. Ironically, one must perform philosophy to argue against its value. During my analysis of The Moral Landscape, I realized that philosophy is as valuable as a tool for analyzing the meaning of data when dealing with the natural world, and that ultimately, one cannot escape philosophy when posed with specific types of questions.

The strength of Harris's proposal is not within his argument for an objective morality. It is through the analysis of his proposal's failures and its salvaged pragmatic argument that we find a valuable product. Ultimately, the same problems that plague Harris's moral landscape will also plague any other attempt to understand morality. Scientists, working together with philosophers, may very well open up the possibilities for ultimately discovering an objective moral system. Philosophy and science do not directly conflict -- both have value in itself and to each other as a means of discovering and analyzing knowledge. Through the very issue of ethics, the two fields can finally be united in the pursuit of truth. ✓

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